

## Briefing

# HEAL questions for European Parliament hearings of Commissioners-designate 2024-2029

People's health is threatened like never before by climate change, pollution and biodiversity loss. EU action to protect health and prevent disease from this triple crisis needs to be swiftly strengthened.

The scientific evidence on how the triple crisis threatens and already impacts people's health across the European Union has steadily increased and underlines the need for urgent action to prevent further suffering' and economic impacts. The health of children, the elderly, those living with disease, and those experiencing socio-economic disadvantages and health inequalities is particularly at risk.

The mission letters include commitments to continue the EU's decarbonisation path, and to protect nature. However, measures to reduce pollution - in the air, water, soil, in people's food and consumer products – seem to have been deprioritised in favour of increasing the competitiveness of Europe's industry and agricultural sector.

*Click the following links to jump to the respective place in the document:*

- [Executive Vice-President-designate Teresa Ribera Rodriguez - Clean, Just and Competitive Transition](#)
- [Executive Vice-President-designate Stéphane Séjourné - Prosperity and Industrial Strategy](#)
- [Commissioner-designate Jessica Roswall - Environment, Water Resilience and a Competitive Circular Economy](#)
- [Commissioner-designate Oliver Varhelyi - Health and Animal Welfare](#)
- [Commissioner-designate Wopke Hoekstra - Climate, Net Zero and Clean Growth](#)

**The Health and Environment Alliance (HEAL)** is the leading not-for-profit organisation addressing how the environment affects human health in the European Union (EU) and beyond. HEAL works to shape laws and policies that promote planetary and human health and protect those most affected by pollution and raise awareness on the benefits of environmental action for health.

HEAL's over 80 member organisations include international, European, national and local groups of health professionals, not-for-profit health insurers, patients, citizens, women, youth, and environmental experts representing over 200 million people across the 53 countries of the WHO European Region.

As an alliance, HEAL brings independent and expert evidence from the health community to EU and global decision-making processes to inspire disease prevention and to promote a toxic-free, low-carbon, fair and healthy future.

HEAL's EU Transparency Register Number: 00723343929-96

## HEAL suggested questions for Executive Vice-President-designate Teresa Ribera Rodriguez

- 1: How will you ensure that the environment-health nexus, the interlinkage between environmental policies and public health, is considered in the policies the Commission will put forward?
- 2: How will you ensure that the health of vulnerable groups is protected from environmental and climate threats?
- 3: How will you ensure the EU invests in better health, not pollution, which is currently the case through especially the continued subsidising of fossil fuels, and the subsidising of wood burning?
- 4: How will you integrate the EU's zero pollution goal and action plan in the Clean Industrial Deal? How will the Clean Industrial Deal contribute to the further reduction of pollution in the air, water, people's food and consumer products, and the prevention of emissions at source?
- 5: There is a growing body of evidence on how socio-economic disadvantage leads to increased exposure to pollution and health impacts. How will you act on the unhealthy connection between social inequalities and pollution, in particular air pollution?

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### Background

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#### 1. Mission letter mandate: Stay the course on the European Green Deal; ensure that the essential environment-health nexus is embedded in all of EU's policies

People's health is threatened like never before from the triple crisis of climate change, pollution and biodiversity loss.

The scientific evidence on how this triple crisis threatens and already impacts people's health across the European Union has steadily increased and underlines the need for urgent action to prevent further suffering' and economic impacts. The health of children, the elderly, those living with disease, and those experiencing socio-economic disadvantages and health inequalities is particularly at risk.

Europe is heating up twice as fast as the rest of the world, and the health impacts from climate change are increasingly being felt. The [EUCRA report on climate risks](#) warns that if no decisive action is taken now, some of the health impacts of climate change will become catastrophic by 2100.

In addition, the health burden from pollution is unacceptably high: 97% of the EU's urban population breathe air considered harmful to health. Exposure to PFAS, the forever chemicals, [is estimated to cost the EU 52-84 billion EUR annually](#), while the health costs of endocrine disrupting chemicals, chemicals that impact the body's hormone system, [have been estimated at 163 billion EUR per year](#).

#### HEAL considers it urgent to:

- Enshrine and deliver on the need to protect people's health from the triple crisis in the structure and initiatives of the EU Commission 2024-29. This includes adopting a disease preventative approach in all upcoming legislation and financial initiatives.
- Adopt climate mitigation and adaptation measures that place health protection at the centre, resulting in significant shared health and economic benefits.
- Adopt timelines and plans to end the burning of fossil fuels swiftly, and boost energy savings and

renewables, without following false solutions like the subsidising of wood burning.

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### *HEAL resources*

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[Letter to President von der Leyen on protecting people's health](#) against climate change, pollution, and biodiversity loss

## **2. Mission letter mandate: Clean Industrial Deal**

The health burden from hazardous chemicals is unacceptably high and keeps growing. Preventing the fast-rising rate of non-communicable diseases, such as breast cancer and prostate cancer, obesity and diabetes as well as infertility and learning disorders, requires urgent improvements in EU laws.

In addition, Europe's reliance on synthetic pesticides in public- and residential areas, and agriculture has harmed people's health and nature.

### **HEAL considers it urgent to:**

- Prioritise the full implementation of the Chemicals Strategy for Sustainability – Towards a Toxic Free Environment.
- Strengthen the implementation of REACH and swiftly restrict harmful substances such as endocrine disruptors and PFAS, which are among the most hazardous chemicals and present everywhere in our daily life.
- Put forward a health-protective update of the EU chemicals law REACH.
- Upgrade legislation on consumer products such as cosmetics and food contact materials to ensure they no longer include harmful chemicals, such as endocrine disrupting chemicals.
- Establish EU policies that recognise vulnerabilities and set ambitious goals to protect them, such as strengthened efforts to tackle pollution at source and swift pesticides reduction actions.
- Adopt measures to swiftly reduce exposure to hazardous pesticides, including ending pesticide use in sensitive areas'. This will prevent new cancer cases, disruption of the body's hormone system, reproductive disorders, and strengthen children's healthy development.

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### *HEAL resources*

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[Key demands for a health-focused reform of REACH](#)

[PFAS pollution hotspots in Europe](#)

[EDC-Free Europe \(edc-free-europe.org\)](http://edc-free-europe.org)

## **3. Mission letter mandate: Just Transition and Leaving no one behind; Energy transition and fossil fuels decrease**

The burning of oil, coal and gas fuels climate change and harms people's health directly through air pollution and indirectly by fuelling global heating. Public financing plays a key role in enabling the transformation

towards healthy people on a healthy planet.

People living in poverty or facing economic hardships are at greater risk of health impacts from environmental and climate threats.

**HEAL considers it urgent to:**

- End all direct and indirect taxpayer financing of activities which harm health, the environment and the climate, especially when it comes to financing of fossil fuels.
- Adopt timelines and plans to end the burning of fossil fuels swiftly, and boost energy savings and renewables, without following false solutions like burning wood
- Recognise the interlinkages between social, environmental and health determinants and act upon them to ensure a just transition.

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*HEAL resources*

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Clean Air Day: [Time to act to tackle socio-economic inequality and protect health, especially in cities](#)

Briefing: [The long neglected health impacts of fossil gas](#)

International health organisations [call for fossil fuel non-proliferation treaty to protect lives of current and future generations](#)

Infographic: [Health and climate threat from wood burning](#)

Report: [Hidden Price Tags](#)

## HEAL suggested questions for Executive Vice-President-designate Stéphane Séjourné

- 1: How will you integrate the EU's zero pollution goal and action plan in the Clean Industrial Deal? How will the Clean Industrial Deal contribute to the further reduction of pollution in the air, water, people's food and consumer products, and the prevention of emissions at source?
2. How will you ensure that the REACH reform will lead to swifter restrictions and phase-outs of hazardous chemicals, for better health?
3. How will you ensure the participation and full involvement of civil society in legislative and consultative processes falling under your portfolio, including in reality-check consultations, in line with the culture of participatory democracy included in the mission letters?

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### *Background*

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#### **1. Mission letter mandate: Clean Industrial Deal, Chemicals Industry Package, REACH, PFAS**

The health burden from hazardous chemicals is unacceptably high and keeps growing. Preventing the fast-rising rate of non-communicable diseases, such as breast cancer and prostate cancer, obesity and diabetes as well as infertility and learning disorders, requires urgent improvements in EU laws.

In addition, Europe's reliance on synthetic pesticides in public and residential areas, and agriculture has harmed people's health and nature.

#### **HEAL considers it urgent to:**

- Prioritise the full implementation of the Chemicals Strategy for Sustainability – Towards a Toxic Free Environment.
- Strengthen the implementation of REACH and swiftly restrict harmful substances such as endocrine disruptors and PFAS, which are among the most hazardous chemicals and present everywhere in our daily life.
- Put forward a health-protective update of the EU chemicals law REACH.
- Upgrade legislation on consumer products such as cosmetics and food contact materials to ensure they no longer include harmful chemicals, such as endocrine disrupting chemicals.
- Establish EU policies that recognise vulnerabilities and set ambitious goals to protect them, such as strengthened efforts to tackle pollution at the source and swift pesticides reduction actions.
- Adopt measures to swiftly reduce exposure to hazardous pesticides, including ending pesticide use in 'sensitive areas'. This will prevent new cancer cases, disruption of the body's hormone system, reproductive disorders, and strengthen children's healthy development.

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### *HEAL resources*

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#### [Key demands for a health-focused reform of REACH](#)

[PFAS pollution hotspots in Europe](#)

[EDC-Free Europe \(edc-free-europe.org\)](http://edc-free-europe.org)

## 2. Mission letter mandate: REACH reform

The landmark EU chemicals law REACH is in dire need of reform, as the pace of restricting and phasing out hazardous chemicals has been woefully slow and challenging for the competent authorities in charge. Under the 2020 [Chemical Strategy for Sustainability \(CSS\)](#), the European Commission committed to publish a proposal to reform REACH in line with the priorities of the strategy by the end of 2022. However, this deadline has been repeatedly extended allowing harmful chemicals to remain on the EU market, polluting our environment and putting people's health at risk.

According to the latest [Eurobarometer](#), 84% of EU citizens are worried about the impact of harmful chemicals present in everyday products and accumulating in their bodies and the environment.

### HEAL considers it urgent to:

- Prioritise the full implementation of the Chemicals Strategy for Sustainability – Towards a Toxic Free Environment.
- Put forward the long-promised health-protective update of the EU chemicals law REACH with no further delay.

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*HEAL resources*

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[Key demands for a health-focused reform of REACH](#)

## HEAL suggested questions for Commissioner-designate Jessica Roswall

1. How will you ensure that the REACH reform will lead to swifter restrictions and phase outs of hazardous chemicals, for better health?
2. How do you see the way forward to tackle the contamination with PFAS, the forever chemicals across the EU? How can the EU advance on a swift restriction to prevent disease?
3. Which proposals do you plan to launch to advance on the EU's zero pollution goal? How will you integrate the zero-pollution objective into the Clean Industrial Deal by 2030 and beyond?
4. How will you take forward reducing pesticide exposure and the related health harm, especially in the context of the Vision for Agriculture and Food and related initiatives?
5. How will you tackle delays in reducing emissions of air pollutants currently regulated by the National Emissions reduction Commitments Directive, in particular PM2.5 precursor ammonia? How do you plan to reduce ozone air pollution across the EU until and after 2030?
6. How will you ensure that the health of vulnerable groups is protected from environmental and climate threats?

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### Background

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#### 1. Mission letter mandate: simplify REACH and provide clarify on PFAS

The landmark EU chemicals law REACH is in dire need of reform, as the pace of restricting and phasing out hazardous chemicals has been woefully slow and challenging for the competent authorities in charge. Under the 2020 [Chemical Strategy for Sustainability \(CSS\)](#), the European Commission committed to publish a proposal to reform REACH in line with the priorities of the strategy by the end of 2022. However, this deadline has been repeatedly extended allowing harmful chemicals to remain on the EU market, polluting our environment and putting people's health at risk.

According to the latest Eurobarometer, 84% of EU citizens are worried about the impact of harmful chemicals present in everyday products and accumulating in their bodies and the environment.

#### HEAL considers it urgent to:

- Prioritise the full implementation of the Chemicals Strategy for Sustainability – Towards a Toxic Free Environment.
- Put forward the long-promised health-protective update of the EU chemicals law REACH with no further delay.

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### HEAL resources

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#### [Key demands for a health-focused reform of REACH](#)

## **2. Mission letter mandate: take forward EU’s zero-pollution ambition, enforce and implement legislation**

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), 20% of early death and disease in Europe are due to pollution.

Pollution, from a cocktail of substances in the air, food, water and earth, impacts adults’ and children’s health even at low levels and at all ages. The health burden from pollution is unacceptably high: 97% of the EU’s urban population breathe air considered harmful to health and according to the EEA EU Member states are so far failing to demonstrate adequate commitment to reduce emissions of all regulated air pollutants. Exposure to PFAS, the forever chemicals, [is estimated to cost the EU 52-84 billion EUR annually](#), while the health costs of endocrine disrupting chemicals, chemicals that impact the body’s hormone system, [have been estimated at 163 billion EUR per year](#).

### **HEAL considers it urgent to:**

- Show political leadership and drive forward science-based clean air laws, including swift implementation and enforcement of stricter clean air standards and stringent measures to cut pollution in all sectors, properly address the slow pace and narrow scope of mandatory decrease of pollutant emissions at national level until 2030 and 2040.
- Establish EU policies that recognise vulnerabilities and set ambitious goals to protect them, such as strict clean air standards and swift pesticide reduction deadlines.

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### *HEAL resources:*

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[HEAL letter to EU Environment Ministers ahead of Council Conclusions on 8 EAP](#)

## **3. Mission letter mandate: Vision for Agriculture and Food**

Synthetic pesticides are harmful by design. Europe’s reliance on synthetic pesticides in public and residential areas, and agriculture has harmed people’s health and nature.

Independent science shows exposure to pesticides can harm people’s health, with children particularly at risk. Impacts include cancer, neurodevelopmental disorders, behavioural disorders, hormone disruption, and other serious health impacts. As published in the EEA 2024 report on how pesticides affect human health, the results of a five-year European human biomonitoring study across five EU found that at least two pesticides were present in the bodies of 84% of survey participants and pesticide levels were consistently higher in children than in adults.

To protect people’s health, it is crucial that the EU continues and increases efforts for pesticide reduction.

### **HEAL considers it urgent to:**

- End the use of hazardous pesticides by 2035.
- Create pesticide-free areas and adequate buffer zones.



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*HEAL resources*

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[Infographic: The impact of harmful pesticides on people's health and the environment](#)

## HEAL suggested questions for Commissioner-designate Oliver Varhelyi

1. How will you contribute and strengthen EU One health measures to reduce pollution for better health, especially in the Clean Industrial Deal, the chemicals industry package, upcoming initiatives for clean air?
2. How will you contribute to ensuring that the REACH reform will lead to swifter restrictions and phase outs of hazardous chemicals, for better health?
- 3: There is a growing body of evidence on how socio-economic disadvantage leads to increased exposure to pollution and health impacts. How will you act on the unhealthy connection between social inequalities and pollution?
- 4: To strengthen prevention of non-communicable diseases, how will you place health at the centre of climate action, ramp up health measures for a non-toxic environment, protect the health of the most vulnerable?
- 5: How will you step up action to protect people's health and prevent disease from hazardous pesticide exposure, especially in the context of the Vision for Agriculture and Food and related initiatives?

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### *Background*

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#### **1. Mission letter mandate: implement European Beating Cancer Plan**

**Context:** The health burden from hazardous chemicals is unacceptably high and keeps growing. Preventing the fast-rising rate of non-communicable diseases, such as breast cancer and prostate cancer, obesity and diabetes as well as infertility and learning disorders, requires urgent improvements in EU laws. The landmark EU chemicals law REACH is in dire need of reform, as the pace of restricting and phasing out chemicals has been woefully slow. Exposure to PFAS, the forever chemicals, [is estimated to cost the EU 52-84 billion EUR annually](#), while the health costs of endocrine disrupting chemicals, chemicals that impact the body's hormone system, [have been estimated at 163 billion EUR per year](#). This health economic burden hampers any attempt of the EU to strengthen competitiveness and sustainability. Air pollution is one of the top risk factors for chronic disease in Europe, leading to hundreds of thousands of early deaths each year and a wide range of preventable health impacts, including cancer, which create billions of cost in health care.

**HEAL considers it urgent to:**

- Put forward the long-promised health-protective update of the EU chemicals law REACH, truly implementing the 'no data, no market' principle, allowing for swifter restrictions of (groups of) substances, to reflect and properly manage people's exposure to chemical mixtures.
- Swiftly restrict harmful substances such as endocrine disruptors and PFAS, which are among the most hazardous chemicals present everywhere in our daily life.
- Show political leadership and drive forward science-based clean air laws, including swift implementation of stricter clean air standards and stringent measures to cut pollution in all sectors.

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## HEAL resources

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[Key demands for a health-focused reform of REACH](#)

Infographic: [How Europe can prevent cancer by tackling environmental pollutants](#)

### **2. Mission letter mandate: build on the “One Health” approach, strengthen prevention of non-communicable diseases**

Pollution in the air, water, soil, food, and daily products harms everyone, posing a particular risk to the most vulnerable. People living in poverty or facing economic hardships are at greater risk of health impacts from environmental and climate threats.

**HEAL considers it urgent to:**

- Establish EU policies that recognise vulnerabilities and set ambitious goals to protect them, such as strict air pollutants emissions reduction timelines and swift pesticide reduction deadlines.
- Adopt mitigation and adaptation measures that place health protection at the centre, resulting in significant shared health and economic benefits.
- Show political leadership and drive forward science-based clean air laws, including swift implementation of stricter clean air standards and stringent measures to cut pollution in all sectors.
- Show political leadership and drive forward science-based toxic free laws, including on pesticides
- Recognise the interlinkages between social, environmental and health determinants and act upon them to ensure a just transition.

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## HEAL resources

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Clean Air Day: [Time to act to tackle socio-economic inequality and protect health, especially in cities](#)

### **3. Mission letter mandate: science-based food safety standards, safe and sustainable food production, high-level of trust by consumers**

Synthetic pesticides are harmful by design. Europe’s reliance on synthetic pesticides in public- and residential areas, and agriculture has harmed people’s health and nature.

Independent science shows exposure to pesticides can harm people’s health, with children particularly at risk. Impacts include cancer, neurodevelopmental disorders, behavioural disorders, hormone disruption, and other serious health impacts. As published in the [EEA 2023 report](#) on how pesticides affect human health, the results of a five-year European human biomonitoring study across five EU found that at least two pesticides were present in the bodies of 84% of survey participants and pesticide levels were consistently higher in children than in adults.

To protect people’s health, it is crucial that the EU continues and increases efforts for pesticide reduction.

**HEAL considers it urgent to:**

- End the use of hazardous pesticides by 2035.
- Create pesticide-free areas and adequate buffer zones.

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*HEAL resources*

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[Infographic: The impact of harmful pesticides on people's health and the environment](#)

## HEAL suggested questions for Commissioner-designate Wopke Hoekstra

1. How will you strengthen health protection in the European Climate Adaptation Plan? Do you commit to assessing the risks to health and health systems from climate change in the assessment underpinning the Plan, which is so far not included?
2. Which date will you set for the phasing out of fossil fuels?
3. How will you involve the health sector in the strategic dialogues on the post-2030 framework?
4. Wood burning is considered a renewable energy source under the EU's Renewable Energy Directive. However, in practice it leads to significant increases in air pollution. Do you support the phasing out of subsidies for the burning of wood?

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### *Background*

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#### **1. Mission letter mandate: propose and enshrine the EU's 2040 goal and organise strategic dialogues with all stakeholders**

People's health is threatened like never before from the triple crisis of climate change, pollution and biodiversity loss.

The scientific evidence on how this triple crisis threatens and already impacts people's health across the European Union has steadily increased and underlines the need for urgent action to prevent further suffering and economic impacts. The health of children, the elderly, those living with disease, and those experiencing socio-economic hardships and health inequalities is particularly at risk.

Europe is heating up twice as fast as the rest of the world, and the health impacts from climate change are increasingly being felt. In the summer of 2023, over 47,000 people lost their lives from the heat, the second highest mortality burden since 2015. New evidence also underlines the interlinkages of air pollution with heat, with air pollution increasing the mortality rates during heatwaves.

The [EUCRA report on climate risks](#) warns that if no decisive action is taken now, some of the health impacts of climate change will become catastrophic by 2100.

#### **HEAL considers it urgent to:**

- Reach climate neutrality in the EU already in 2040.
- Achieve a fossil free power sector by 2035.
- Adopt mitigation and adaptation measures that place health protection at the centre, resulting in significant shared health and economic benefits.
- Require member states to carry out a health impact assessment in the national climate and energy plans (NECPs).

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## HEAL resources

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[Letter to the President of the European Commission on protecting people's health against climate change, pollution and biodiversity loss](#)

[Climate Resilience – The Role of the Healthcare Sector](#)

### 2. Mission letter mandate: Lead on the European Climate Adaptation Plan

The EUCRA report on climate risks considers health as one of the five priority areas where EU action is essential. EUCRA concludes that health is impacted by climate change in many ways, both at the individual level and through systemic risks to the health system.

Protecting people's health against extreme weather events – especially heat and floods – and against wildfires are identified as particularly pressing areas for action.

In addition, climate change deepens existing inequalities between different groups and among European regions and sub-regions. People faced with socio-economic disadvantages, children, pregnant women, the elderly, or those living with disease are particularly at risk from climate-related health impacts.

#### HEAL considers it urgent to:

- Develop a comprehensive health action plan for adaptation and mitigation at EU level and encourage the development of such plans for the national and local level.
- Provide financial incentives and support to enhance urban planning and early warning systems.
- Reduce climate-related health inequalities through targeted policies integrating resilience and health equity into climate mitigation and adaptation

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## HEAL resources

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[Lancet Countdown in Europe, Standing Committee of European Doctors \(CPME\), Association of Schools of Public Health in the European Region \(ASPHER\): 2024 Climate and Health Policy Priorities for Europe](#)

### 3. Mission letter mandate: Framework to further scale down and phase out the use of fossil fuels

The burning of oil, coal and gas fuels climate change and harms people's health directly through air pollution and indirectly by fuelling global heating. Fossil fuel pollution is estimated to cause one in five deaths worldwide annually.

The burning of wood is not an alternative solution, neither for health nor the climate. Wood burning is the fastest growing source of particulate matter pollution in cities. However, it is considered a renewable energy source in the EU Renewable Energy Directive; and public subsidies are being awarded for it.

#### HEAL considers it urgent to:

- End all direct and indirect taxpayer financing of activities which harm health, the environment and the climate, especially when it comes to financing of fossil fuels.

- Adopt timelines and plans to end the burning of fossil fuels swiftly, and boost energy savings and renewables, without following false solutions like burning wood.
- End the subsidising of wood burning, and end burning wood altogether.
- Recognise the interlinkages between social, environmental and health determinants and act upon them to ensure a just transition.

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### HEAL resources

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Briefing: [The long neglected health impacts of fossil gas](#)

International health organisations [call for fossil fuel non-proliferation treaty to protect lives of current and future generations](#)

Infographic: [Health and climate threat from wood burning](#)

Report: [Hidden Price Tags](#)



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